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Khattab

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Author: Muhammad al-`Ubaydi

Editor: Nelly Lahoud

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Khattab (1969–2002)

By Muhammad al-`Ubaydi

The views expressed in this report are the author's and do not necessarily reflect those of the Combating Terrorism Center, the US Military Academy, the Department of Defense or the US government.

Introduction¹

In May 2011, a member of the jihadi website *Shumukh al-Islam* initiated a survey designed to identify the “main reason that made you [i.e., the online group’s members] love jihad.” Some of the available answers listed included: “Family member,” “Internet,” “a friend” or “one of the Sheikhs.” Of the eighty-seven *Shumukh* members who responded, ten of them credited Khattab, the subject of this biography, and the Arab jihad against the Russians in the Caucasus as the reason behind their commitment to jihad. Khattab’s influence ranked second to religious upbringing in the survey, credited by eighteen members as their main motivation to love jihad. It is remarkable that Khattab’s influence is ranked ahead of Usama bin Ladin’s, credited by six members to have caused them to take up jihad.² Khattab’s role in and influence on the jihadi landscape is not limited to online members of jihadi websites. The jihadi intellectual

¹ The author would like to thank one anonymous reviewer, whose insight into the project was very helpful. In addition, the author would like to acknowledge the especially dedicated effort of Dr. Nelly Lahoud on this project. Beyond just editing the piece, she offered valuable insights and assistance in making this piece what it is.

² The member writes under the name “Abdooo6.” See “Istitla` Muhimm: Ma huwa Awwal Sabab Ja`alaka Tuhibbu al-Jihad?,” *Shabakat Shumukh al-Islam*, <https://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=109641>, accessed on 14 May 2014. The survey is ongoing; the period covered in this study is between May 2011 and May 2014. During that period, the influence of a friend was ranked third (nine members) and the attacks of 9/11 ranked fourth (eight members). In May 2014, the total number of *Shumukh* members was 9,464. Unless otherwise stated, translation of Arabic sources are by Muhammad al-'Ubaydi.

Mustafa Hamid remarks in one of his books that Khattab's jihadi project was, in the 1990s, comparable to if not more ambitious than that of Bin Ladin's.³

Who, then, was Khattab, and what was his contribution to the jihadi enterprise? As this biography reveals, Khattab was an international jihadist par excellence. He was born in Saudi Arabia and took up jihad first in Afghanistan, then in Tajikistan and Dagestan, and finally in Chechnya, where he devoted most of his political and militant energy and where he died. In the mid-1990s, he became the leader of the Arab Ansar in Chechnya, and he had his own resources and funds.⁴ His charismatic leadership enabled him to recruit not just Arab fighters but also Muslims of other nationalities, including Tajiks, Afghans and Uzbeks, who joined his group in Chechnya to fight against the Russians. He was keen to understand the culture of the places in which he fought, especially that

³ Mustafa Hamid [a.k.a Mustafa Abu al-Walid], *Tajikistan*, no date. In this book, written by Hamid as part of a series called *Tharthara Fawqa Saqf al-'Alam*, Abu al-Walid mentions that he knew Khattab personally, and that he met him for the first time in Afghanistan. Abu al-Walid traveled to Afghanistan in 1979, where he met Jalaluddin Haqqani and fought alongside him until, as Hamid puts it, "the liberation of Gardez," Afghanistan on April 1992. He had a good relationship with the other leaders of the jihad in Afghanistan, such as Yunis Khalis, Mawlawi Nasrullah Mansur and 'Abdallah 'Azzam. Although Abu al-Walid has never joined al-Qa'ida, he had a good relationship with its previous leader, Usama bin Ladin, and the current one, Ayman al-Zawahiri. In early 1993, Abu al-Walid supervised the training of jihadis of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) of Abdullo Nuri (also known by the name Hezb-e-Nehzad in Tajik). He was among the first Arabs to pledge allegiance to Mullah Muhammad 'Umar in 1997. At the time of this writing, Abu al-Walid resides in his native homeland, Egypt. He has written over twenty books and many articles, and he has conducted a number of interviews with various jihadist figures over his career, mostly documenting the history of the Afghan jihad against the Russians. See http://www.mustafahamed.com/?page_id=2

⁴ Mustafa Hamid, *Tajikistan*.

of Chechnya, and beside his mother tongue, he learned to speak Russian, English, Farsi, Chechen and Kurdish.⁵

Khattab is believed to have pioneered the use of jihadist media, especially the production of videos calling for jihad.⁶ Some of the notable jihadists he inspired to join the global jihad include the Saudi Faysal al-Dakhil, who later joined al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula” (AQAP), and earned a name on a list of terrorists most wanted by the Saudi government after his group beheaded the U.S. helicopter engineer Paul Johnson, and who was killed by Saudi authorities in June 2004; and Khalid bin `Abdallah al-Sbayit, who fought in Afghanistan, Chechnya and Dagestan, and was finally killed by the Saudi authorities while fighting alongside AQAP in April 2004.⁷

⁵ YouTube video (no titled), uploaded by “khattab8477,” 10 December 2008, www.youtube.com/watch?v=bdaU093qILU.

⁶ Mustafa Hamid, *Tajikistan*.

⁷ For Faysal al-Dakhil, see “Interview with Faysal bin `Abd al-Rahman al-Dakhil,” *Sawt al-Jihad*, no. 14, Safar 1425 (corresponding to March–April 2004) *Sawt al-Jihad* is a jihadist magazine that used to be published by AQAP; for al-Dakhil’s death, see “Washington tushid bi-al-Riyadh wa-al-` Alam yastankir i`dam al-rahina Johnson,” *Jaridat al-Dustur*, 20 June 2004, www.addustour.com/13600/%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B4%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%86+%D8%AA%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%AF+%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B6+%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85+%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%86%D9%83%D8%B1+%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%85+%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%87%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%A9+%D8%AC%D9%88%D9%86%D8%B3%D9%88%D9%86%3A+%D8%AA%D8%A3%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%AF+%D9%85%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%84+%D8%B2%D8%B9%D9%8A%D9%85+%60%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A9%60+%D9%81%D9%8A+%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9.html; for Khalid bin `Abdallah al-Sbayit, see “`Isa bin Sa`ad Al `Awshan, Khalid bin `Abdullah al-Sbayit...Fida’ wa-Tadhiya,” *Sawt al-Jihad*, no. 15, Rabi` al-Awal 1425 (corresponding to April–May 2004).

Khattab started his jihadist journey fighting against the Soviet army in Afghanistan, but it was in Chechnya that he made his name known to the wider world. Khattab was listed on Moscow's most-wanted list; the FSB, the Russian security service, ultimately assassinated him in April 2002.⁸ Of the many features that make Khattab stand out in the jihadi universe, two perhaps are worth highlighting. The first is his virtually exclusive focus on fighting Russian forces; even though he lived long enough to see the U.S. campaign against Afghanistan, Khattab maintained all his media and his battlefield resources focused solely on the Russians. The second is his abstention from making Arab leaders and governments central to his jihad. Although Khattab criticized "Arab leaders" once for "protecting those Jews [in Palestine]," he refrained from making any statements that would call on Muslims to fight against Arab governments.⁹

This biography of Khattab covers different stages of his life. It begins with his early years in Saudi Arabia (1969–1988), then moves to his time in Afghanistan (1988–1994) and Tajikistan (1994–1995), and then discusses his time spent in his final destination, Chechnya (1995–2002). This biography is based largely on primary sources in the Arabic

⁸ "Russia 'Kills' Chechnya Warlord," BBC News, 25 April 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/1950679.stm>.

⁹ YouTube video (no title), 17 October 2010, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NjX50mdLRSc&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

language; Khattab's journey is thus presented as an "insider's" account and not as his enemies saw him.¹⁰

Early Life in Saudi Arabia, 1969–1988

Samir bin Salih bin `Abdullah al-Suwaylim, better known as Khattab or Ibn Khattab, was born on 26 Muharram 1389 H (corresponding to 14 April 1969) in Saudi Arabia.

Like most Saudis, Khattab was raised in a religious family.¹¹ His father was born in al-Ahsa' province and moved to the city of `Ar`ar in the northern part of Saudi Arabia.

Khattab's father used to take his two young sons with him on hunting trips and wanted to raise them to be strong and brave. He died two years before the death of Khattab.¹²

Khattab's mother, Rasmiya al-Muhtadi, was born in Syria and was of Turkish descent, as her father had emigrated from Turkey after the fall of the Ottoman Empire.¹³ Khattab

¹⁰ Russian non-jihadi sources would obviously paint Khattab differently.

¹¹ The Media Wing of Kata'ib al-Nur, *al-Thamar al-Mustatab fi Sirat al-Qa'id Khattab*, no date, www.saaaid.net/Doat/hamad/khattab.pdf. While all primary sources tell us that Khattab was born in Saudi Arabia, some secondary sources suggest that he was born in Jordan to a tribe living near the border with Saudi Arabia. For example, see "Obituary: Chechen Rebel Khattab," BBC News, 26 April 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/1952053.stm>. Furthermore, some secondary sources refer to him as an ethnic Chechen from the Arabian Peninsula; however, his family denied all these rumors in a letter sent to media outlets including *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, confirming that Khattab was born in `Ar`ar, Saudi Arabia, and that he was a descendent of a family that used to live in Najd, Saudi Arabia. See "al-Jaysh al-Rusi: Qatalna Shamil Basayiv wa-lakin lam Na'thur 'ala Juththatihi ba'd," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 1 May 2002, <http://classic.aawsat.com/details.asp?article=101021&issueno=8555#.VEAWOVcy08A>.

¹² "al-Jaysh al-Rusi," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*.

¹³ Ibid.

was particularly fond of his mother, and he clearly agonized over his yearning to see his family and his commitment to global jihad that necessitated being away from them. It seems that his mother did not hide her longing to see her son and continuously pleaded with him to return home. In a short message Khattab addressed to Muslims “around the Globe,” he highlighted this agony, and no doubt that of many fellow jihadis, but he also sought to stress that commitment to jihad should take priority over the love of family:

The biggest obstacle that stands between us and jihad is family. We have carried out jihad without the approval of our families. If we obey [their instructions] and return to our homelands, who would carry on this burden and continue al-da`wa. Every time I talk to my mother on the phone, she asks me: “when will you return home my son?” But if I return to be with my mother, whom I haven’t seen for more than 12 years, who would continue [the journey] that we have started?¹⁴

Khattab seems to have had a good relationship with his brother; upon hearing the news of his death, his brother, Abu ‘Umar, could not control his pain. He later described the

¹⁴ Al-Zubayr al-Maqhur, “A Message by the Lion of Chechnya, Khattab,” *Shumukh al-Islam*, 26 May 2013, <https://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=202231&highlight=%CE%D8%C7%C8> .

pain he suffered as stemming from not just losing “my dearest brother” but also of losing someone whom he considered to be his “leader.” When he went to share the news with his mother that same day, he relates, “When I saw her, I couldn’t hold myself together, and I cried loudly.”¹⁵

Khattab studied in ‘Ar‘ar until the third grade, and he continued his education in the city of al-Khubar, in Saudi Arabia’s eastern region, where his family moved. Khattab had ambitions to pursue his tertiary education abroad, and he must have been a promising student given that he was selected by ARAMCO, a Saudi national oil and natural gas company, to complete its College Preparatory Program (CPC). According to the company’s website, the CPC is a highly selective program “designed to prepare select high school graduates for admission to and success at competitive universities worldwide.”¹⁶

¹⁵ Wa-Islamah.net, *Sayf al-Islam Khattab*. no date. This is a documentary produced by the Islamic website Wa-Islamah.net to commemorate Khattab, as the first part of a series called Contemporary Heroes of Islam. Translation from Arabic provided by the source and amended by Muhammad al-‘Ubaydi.

¹⁶ It is not clear if Khattab completed his CPC. The ARAMCO website indicates that it is a one-year program, but Khattab’s brother notes that Khattab pursued his CPC for “about six months.” Information about CPC may be found at www.saudiaramco.com/en/home/join-us/jobs-and-programs-for-saudis/college-preparatory-program.html#join-us%257C%252Fen%252Fhome%252Fjoin-us%252Fjobs-and-programs-for-saudis%252Fcollege-preparatory-program.baseajax.html; for Khattab’s brother’s remarks in this regard, see Wa-Islamah.net, *Sayf al-Islam Khattab*.

Khattab's desire to take up militancy was largely influenced by the global events that affected Muslims in the 1908s, like the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and the first Palestinian intifada in 1987. Initially, he reacted to these events by expressing his emotions in the form of comments scribbled in his schoolbooks.¹⁷ One notable passage, titled "The End" and later circulated in jihadist forums and networks, addresses the subject of death and the way in which he wishes his end to be:

[Reflect how] a drop of poison could make you fall down, paralyzing you. Know that this life is transient, there is nothing good [enduring] in it; otherwise, this drop of poison would not have such an effect on you. Choose for yourself the way you die, and make your end in the service of a great cause that will leave you immortal in Paradise. And be aware not to die for the cause of an unknown matter which might end in a bad way.¹⁸

In view of his commitment to such global causes, Khattab's later becoming inspired by Islamic scholars, in particular 'Abdallah 'Azzam, who called upon Muslim youth to

¹⁷ Wa-Islamah.net, *Sayf al-Islam Khattab*.

¹⁸ "Um Mujahid, Khattab," *Al-Fida' Islamic Network*, 29 December 2011, <http://alfidaa.org/vb/showthread.php?t=17534&highlight=%CE%D8%C7%C8>.

participate in jihad in Afghanistan against the Soviets, should not be surprising. In 1988, Khattab began his jihadist journey, Afghanistan being his first stop.¹⁹

Afghanistan, 1988–1993

Khattab traveled to Afghanistan immediately after Ramadan 1408 H (May 1988). To ensure that he would be welcomed by the mujahidin in Afghanistan, he took with him two recommendation letters; one of them was signed by Maktab Khadamat al-Mujahidin of al-Dammam, Saudi Arabia, and the other was signed by an individual who had strong ties with the man in charge of the Saudi Red Crescent in Pakistan at that time. Khattab stayed in Afghanistan for two months, after which he returned to Saudi Arabia for the hajj and then returned to Afghanistan.

After he completed his initial brief military training, Khattab quickly joined the fight.²⁰

In the late 1990s, following the famous airport operation in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, Khattab formed his own group, separate from that of Bin Ladin's, who was at that time the "general commander of Arab forces there."²¹ Khattab was able to gather a number of Saudi youths from the different camps around him and create his own company, called

¹⁹ Wa-Islamah.net, *Sayf al-Islam Khattab*.

²⁰ The Media Wing of Kata'ib al-Nur, *al-Thamar al-Mustatab fi Sirat al-Qa'id Khattab*.

²¹ Mustafa Hamid [a.k.a Mustafa Abu al-Walid], *Salib fi Sama' Kandahar*, no date. Written by Hamid as part of a series called Tharthara Kharij Nizam al-'Alam.

“Khattab Company,” or as he liked to call it, the “Artillery Company in Jalalabad,” with “brother Abu Ayyub al-`Iraqi” as his deputy.²² He was able to fund his company from his own resources. According to Mustafa Hamid, “the period was the darkest period in the history of Jalalabad, as a number of horrible disagreements, arguments, and acquisitions took place between various companies there.”²³ This probably explains why Khattab did not have many fond memories to share about the period he spent in Afghanistan, and it is also probably the reason he decided to relocate to another jihadi field, one in which he did not have to compete with other Arab militant groups.

Khattab’s recollection of his experience in Afghanistan does not flatter the role that Arabs played there. In one of his audio releases, titled “Jihad from a Furnished Apartment,” Khattab remarks that Afghanistan was the first and easiest part of his journey.²⁴ He adds that “we didn’t really do jihad in Afghanistan. The Afghans did almost everything. The [Arab] brothers who came in the beginning faced the [real] difficulties. When I arrived in Afghanistan, most matters were already arranged.”²⁵

²² Samir Saleh al-Suwailem, *Memories of Amir Khattab: The Experience of the Arab Ansar* [Arab foreign fighters] in Chechnya, Afghanistan and Tajikistan, *Shabakat Ansar al-Mujahidin*, no date, translated by Ansar al-Mujahideen English Forum and amended by Muhammad al-`Ubaydi, <https://as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=68864&highlight=%CE%D8%C7%C8>.

²³ Mustafa Hamid [a.k.a Mustafa Abu al-Walid], *al-Hamaqa al-Kubra*, no date. Written by Hamid as part of a series called Tharthara Fawqa Saqf al-`Alam.

²⁴ Samir Saleh al-Suwailem, *Memories of Amir Khattab*.

²⁵ Ibid.

Khattab criticized the role of Arabs in the Afghan jihad, who he believed were dependent on Afghans for almost everything, including medical treatment for injuries. Based on what he witnessed, he claims that Arab fighters tended to receive inadequate military training before proceeding to the battlefield, whereas Afghans limited their fighting to simple shooting from a specified position.²⁶ Khattab, however, acknowledged the role played by Arabs in some battles, remarking that “they did great in Jaji when the Russians attacked the biggest and most important mujahidin’s route in southern Afghanistan and in Kandahar.”²⁷

In essence, Khattab criticized the Arabs’ experience in Afghanistan for not connecting theory with practice when it came to translating *da`wa* (religious educational efforts) into carrying out jihad. Although he acknowledged that Arabs “established institutions, universities, and major efforts were achieved with regard to Da`wa,” he did not believe that these yielded results on the jihadist front. He derisively remarked, “What was the fate of the [Afghan] student who studied four years [in these institutions]? He worked as a cook in a guest house, went to a Gulf [state] to learn Arabic language or become a merchant.” In his view, the founders of such institutions “should have finished the efforts that they started. They built a project that is based on a firm foundation, so finish

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

your work, and give your students weapons and ammunition. These [students] are going to be the leaders of the future.”²⁸

Tajikistan, 1994–1995

A considerable part of the Afghanistan-Tajikistan border is formed by the Jayhoun River, known as the Panj River. Mustafa Hamid relates that in the fall of 1992, a delegation from Hezb-e-Nehzad (an Islamic party that follows the Muslim Brotherhood ideology and was founded in 1973 as a party opposing the Soviet rule of Tajikistan) went to Peshawar to ask for support against the Tajik communist government, which was backed by the Russian army stationed there at the time.²⁹ As a response, Hamid continues, three different groups of Arab foreign fighters joined the Tajik Islamic project: the first one was formed by fighters who were not affiliated with any party and took it upon themselves to train a force consisting of Hezb-e-Nehzad members. The second one was formed by volunteer fighters who wanted to fight alongside Hezb-e-Nehzad. And the third group was led by Khattab who, after securing funding from Saudi Arabia, was able to move his group from Jalalabad to the Afghan side of Panj River.³⁰ Although the “river was [like] a wild beast and crossing it was jihad in itself,”³¹

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Mustafa Hamid, *Salib fi Sama’ Kandahar*.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Samir Saleh al-Suwailem, *Memories of Amir Khattab*.

Khattab and his group chose to station themselves on the Afghan side of the river and to cross the river back and forth each time they wanted to carry out an operation against Soviet troops in Tajikistan.³² Crossing the river by using fleet of speed boats that Khattab owned wasn't the only obstacle that faced the group.³³ He relates that they could use vehicles only up to a certain point, following which "we had to continue the journey mounting donkeys for three to four days."³⁴ If this was not enough, after they crossed the river, they had to endure the hardship of climbing "mountains and mountains the likes of which my eyes had never seen."³⁵

Khattab was keen to be as little a burden on his fellow Tajik jihadis as possible. He spent four months acquiring the basic needs of his group, using his own resources, including the purchase of "weapons, communication devices and other logistics." His only request from the Tajik was the need for "mujahidin from those whom you know or can recommend so that we can train and even equip them with everything. After we prepare these people militarily, we will fight battles alongside them."³⁶

³² Mustafa Hamid, *Tajikistan*.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Samir Saleh al-Suwailem, *Memories of Amir Khattab*.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

Khattab started with a small number of “no more than 100–200” men.³⁷ To avoid creating animosity with the local opposition, Khattab established links from the start with Abdullo Nuri,³⁸ the head of Hezb-e-Nehzad and one of the leaders of the Tajik opposition against the Soviets at that time.³⁹ The link was through one of Nuri’s field commanders, ‘Abd al-Samad Mullah Qurban.⁴⁰ However, it seems that Khattab was concerned about compromising the quality of his jihad in Tajikistan when the leader of Hezb-e-Nehzad’s changed to a certain Radwan, about whom Mustafa Hamid dedicated an entire chapter in one of his books, in which he described him as an “ordinary criminal.”⁴¹ This may explain why Khattab chose to move to Chechnya.

In Hamid’s view, notwithstanding Khattab’s efforts to establish a solid jihadist operation in Tajikistan during the year he spent there, his activity was mostly largely fruitless. Much of his group’s energy was spent crossing the river and climbing the high mountains to take over the Soviet checkpoints, only to abandon them and retreat later during the winter season.⁴² Hamid mentions in one of his books that he advised Khattab

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ For Khattab’s establishing links with Abdullo Nuri, see Ibid. For Bibih wild Mahadi, Liqa’ al-Yawm ma’ al-Sayyid ‘Abdullah Nuri, interview conducted by al-Jazeera satellite channel with Nuri on 26 May 2005, www.aljazeera.net/programs/pages/ae96b49d-7208-4bdc-b65c-adc2e1465f.

⁴⁰ Samir Saleh al-Suwailem, *Memories of Amir Khattab*.

⁴¹ Mustafa Hamid, *Tajikistan*.

⁴² Ibid.

in a letter to “save his time and energy and enter inside Tajikistan to carry out jihad from there.”⁴³

Khattab chose to leave Tajikistan in search of another destination, but Tajikistan did not want to leave Khattab without taking a souvenir from him that would stay forever on its soils. Khattab lost two of his right-hand fingers while throwing a hand grenade in a battle, forcing him to learn to use his left hand for the rest of his jihadi career.⁴⁴

Khattab’s Final Destination: Chechnya, 1995–2002

After Khattab left Tajikistan in early 1995, he returned to Afghanistan for a short period before he started hearing the news about the growing insurgency against Russian forces in Chechnya. At that time, it wasn’t clear to him whether this insurgency was of an Islamic nature or not.⁴⁵ At that point, Khattab didn’t even know where Chechnya was located, so “[he] started to search for Chechnya on the map.”⁴⁶ This time he did his homework before he committed himself and his group to the Chechen cause. Khattab and his group entered Chechnya in spring of 1995, initially planning to stay there for

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ The Media Wing of Kata’ib al-Nur, *al-Thamar al-Mustatab fi Sirat al-Qa’id Khattab*.

⁴⁵ *Sirat al-Mujahid al-Shahid bi-Ithn Allah Ta’ala Khattab*,
<http://montada.rasoulallah.net/index.php?showtopic=50768>.

⁴⁶ Samir Saleh al-Suwailem, *Memories of Amir Khattab*.

two to three weeks to survey the situation.⁴⁷ He carried his camera around with him and talked to people he met, including Shamil Basayev (a field commander in the Chechen insurgency who became deputy prime minister of Chechnya in Maskhadov's government later). His investigative approach gave many people the impression that he was a journalist.⁴⁸

Before heading to Chechnya, Khattab had been in touch with a Chechen field commander named Sheikh Fathi al-Shishani, a Jordanian of Chechen origins who had fought in Afghanistan, then returned to Jordan after the Soviet withdrawal, before ultimately going to Chechnya.⁴⁹ Fathi al-Shishani informed Khattab of the rapidly changing nature of the situation in Chechnya, and he predicted that Khattab would find a receptive environment in Chechnya and would not want to leave.⁵⁰

Fathi's prediction was right, and Khattab would spend the rest of his life fighting for the Chechen cause. It is not entirely clear why Khattab made a strong commitment to Chechnya at the expense of other causes that he professed to believe in. For example, when the first president of Chechnya, Dzhokhar Dudayev, asked Khattab in his first

⁴⁷ *Sirat al-Mujahid al-Shahid bi-Ithn Allah Ta'ala Khattab*, <http://montada.rasoulallah.net/index.php?showtopic=50768>.

⁴⁸ Samir Saleh al-Suwailem, *Memories of Amir Khattab*.

⁴⁹ Hamad al-Qatari, "Min Qisas al-Shuhada' al-'Arab", <http://www.saaaid.net/Doat/hamad/38.htm>.

⁵⁰ Samir Saleh al-Suwailem, *Memories of Amir Khattab*.

meeting with him the reason he had chosen to fight in Chechnya instead of Palestine, Khattab replied that “the Arab rulers are our curse; they are the ones standing between us and the Jews to protect them.”⁵¹ Khattab did not consider himself to be neglecting the Palestinian cause. In a phone interview with al-Jazeera, he asserted his commitment to the Palestinian cause but within a global jihadi context:

We live a jihadi experience and [we are engaged in a] fierce fight against Russian forces who by far outnumber the Israeli army and are better equipped. We will never forget our brothers in al-Aqsa. Al-Aqsa is our primary case, and the mujahidun have initiated practical steps to carry out operations against the Jews . . . The Jews exist everywhere, and to hit them, we do not necessarily have to march unto them and hit them inside Palestine.⁵²

It is possible that Khattab’s commitment to Chechnya was his way of committing to a cause on his own terms rather than being guided by conditions set by others. That is probably what he meant when he reflected in his memoirs that “[Muslim] peoples don’t recognize the [importance] of a case, unless they are given the green light. For example,

⁵¹ YouTube video (no title), uploaded by “Khattab8477,” 10 December 2008, www.youtube.com/watch?v=bdaU093qILU.

⁵² Ahmed Mansur, *Bila Hudud*, interview conducted by al-Jazeera satellite channel with Dr. `Abd al-Wahab al-Msayri in August 2000, www.aljazeera.net/home/print/0353e88a-286d-4266-82c6-6094179ea26d/907c87b8-81e9-427a-b616-2a26fc423a5e.

the Tajik case was totally neglected because the green light was not granted. Also, Chechnya during the first war was neglected by the entire Islamic world. Furthermore, parties, organizations and groups abandoned it because they thought it was a lost cause . . . Also, the Bosnia and Herzegovina case was forgotten until the green light was granted, then everyone went there.”⁵³

It is perhaps helpful to divide Khattab’s activities in Chechnya into four key phases: the first phase involved establishing his reputation through setting up training camps and participating in the first Chechen war. The second phase focused on expanding his training activities to include *da`wa* and relief work. The third phase was an unsuccessful tour in Dagestan; and the fourth phase was Khattab’s participation in the second Chechen war and his death.

Training, Gaining Reputation and Participating in the First Chechen War

From the beginning of Khattab’s experience in Chechnya, he realized that the majority of Chechen Muslims are Sufis; therefore, he demanded no more than basic Islamic practice from those who joined his training camps (praying five times a day, fasting and reading the Qur’an). In his autobiography/memoir, Khattab recounts that “more than 60% of the youth who joined my group were either Sufis or came from Sufi families, so I

⁵³ Samir Saleh al-Suwailem, *Memories of Amir Khattab*.

made sure to abandon disagreement, dispute or rigid interpretation [in Islamic legal matters].”⁵⁴ However, when it came to discipline in military training, Khattab was very tough; out of 105 people who wanted to be trained by his group, he expelled 45 who did not meet his standard.⁵⁵

When he reflected on his experience in Chechnya, he took immense pride in the casualties inflicted upon the Russian forces by Chechens whom he trained:

We started training young men, as we established a base for them in the mountains. We picked a village called Vedenov for that. Then, we started carrying out operations [against Russian forces]. The first operation was against an armed convoy in Kharachoy in the south of Vedenov. The Russians were smashed; they lost five vehicles, 41 killed, including five officers, while we suffered no injuries or deaths. This operation had a great impact, as no one previously dared to attack the Russian war machine. Three or four days after this operation, people heard about us, and more young men decided to join us . . .

⁵⁴ The Media Wing of Kata’ib al-Nur, *al-Thamar al-Mustatab fi Sirat al-Qa’id Khattab*.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

We struck another convoy in Serjenyurt during one of the most difficult times when Russian forces were leading a massive offensive on the mountains. We destroyed 47 out of 100 of their vehicles, and we gained a lot of bootie from them . . . Two weeks later, we attacked a convoy of 32 vehicles, four tanks, 11 armored vehicles, four tankers and the rest were trucks. They were all crushed from the first to the last one, only 12 soldiers, who were in the last vehicle, survived and escaped through the river.⁵⁶

Judging by the nature of his involvement in Chechnya, one may speculate that Khattab's jihadist identity was not fully formed until this stage of his life. During the first Chechen war, he still considered himself to be represented by the flag of Saudi Arabia.⁵⁷ This may have been partly due to the funding he received from there.⁵⁸ Perhaps more importantly, it may have been due to the recognition his mission received from eminent religious Saudi scholars like `Abd al-`Aziz bin Baz, Muhammad al-

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Khattab filmed himself carrying the flag of Saudi Arabia, celebrating the withdrawal of the Russian troops from Vedeno village, Chechnya, on 30 October 1995 and on the background. See Wa-Islamah.net, *Sayf al-Islam Khattab*.

⁵⁸ Most of the Saudi and other Gulf states' funds stopped after the April 2004 death of Khattab's successor (who was also of Saudi origin), Abu al-Walid al-Ghamidi. See Al-Battar al-Sunni, Jalsa Hiwariya ma' Mujahid Shishani, Al-Fida' Islamic Network, 2 August 2011, <http://alfidaa.org/vb/showthread.php?t=4307&highlight=%CE%D8%C7%C8>.

`Uthaymin, Muhammad al-Farraj, Slayman al-`Alwan and `Abdullah bin Jibrin.⁵⁹

Khattab also saw himself as a Saudi citizen fighting under the leadership of Dzhokhar Dudayev. Following the Russian withdrawal from Chechnya, Khattab, Shamil Basayev and a number of jihadist leaders received medals of bravery from the Chechen government; Khattab was also awarded the rank of major general at that same ceremony.⁶⁰ However, after forming the “Islamic Army” (also known by other names such as the “Islamic International Brigades”) in 1998, Khattab started to use his own flag, which appears in the rest of his video releases.⁶¹

Expansion, Training, *Da`wa* and Relief Work

The withdrawal of Russian troops from Chechnya gave Khattab a sense of victory, and he decided to expand his project beyond military training. He “established an Islamic educational institute,” where youth attended courses in “Islamic teachings and military training.” Some “400 men” attended these courses; these men “came from throughout the Caucasus region.” The courses consisted of providing students with basic Islamic teachings as well as advanced courses to graduate preachers to meet the religious needs

⁵⁹ For Bin Baz and al-`Uthaymin, see the Media Wing of Kata'ib al-Nur, *al-Thamar al-Mustatab fi Sirat al-Qa'id Khattab*; for al-Farraj, al-`Alwan and Bin Jibrin, see Wa-Islamah.net, *Sayf al-Islam Khattab*.

⁶⁰ YouTube video, uploaded by “M7MADGG's channel,” 18 September 2010, www.youtube.com/watch?v=oCK8Zmv1IB8.

⁶¹ For the Islamic International Peacekeeping Brigade, see Terrorism Research and Analysis Corporation, “Islamic International Peacekeeping Brigade (IIPB),” no date, www.trackingterrorism.org/group/islamic-international-peacekeeping-brigade; for Khattab's starting to use his own flag, see Wa-Islamah.net, *Sayf al-Islam Khattab*.

of villages.. At the same time, “we maintained our focus on military training, and added special [advanced] courses.”

Beyond this, Khattab felt the need to settle with his group on a permanent basis in Chechnya, guaranteeing to the locals that he and his group were not simply foreign fighters who would leave once the conflict was over. In that spirit, “[they] married from the people [there],” to establish blood ties.⁶² Khattab also realized the importance of relief work and embarked on a large campaign of delivering basic food supplies to villages. His popularity was such that many people named their newborn babies after him.⁶³

It was during this time that Khattab caught the attention of a fellow Saudi jihadist Usama bin Ladin, and a channel of communication began between the two ambitious leaders. Each tried to attract the other to his side. Mustafa Hamid dedicated a sizeable portion of one of his books this period. Hamid relates that:

Khattab was strongly backed by one of the wings of the Saudi Islamic scholars who provided him with funds and youth [to join his camps]. Khattab succeeded

⁶² Samir Saleh al-Suwailem, *Memories of Amir Khattab*.

⁶³ Wa-Islamah.net, *Sayf al-Islam Khattab*.

in establishing an economic power that was funded by the Gulf States and was able to monopolize Arab activity in Chechnya. He also had his own media wing that connected him to the world. His situation in Chechnya, until the beginning of the second Russian campaign in Chechnya in 1999, was better than that of Bin Laden in Afghanistan. Khattab and Bin Laden started to reach out to each other, and each one tried to attract the other to his project. Bin Laden thought that Khattab should join his project in carrying out jihad against the Americans who occupied Bilad al-Haramayn [Saudi Arabia] while Khattab pursued a more ambitious objective, namely to liberate Middle Asia, some of the Caucasus regions including Dagestan from the Russians . . .

The communication continued between the two Saudi wings in Afghanistan and Chechnya, however, they did not achieve any results.⁶⁴

Despite the differences in their respective agendas, the Afghan wing led by Bin Ladin shared its concern about the Russians with Khattab, warning him in 1998 that the Russians may have been preparing to wage a second war against Chechnya. The letter read:

⁶⁴ Mustafa Hamid, *Salib fi Sama' Kandahar*.

From studying the Russian presence in Chechnya, [one may surmise] that their strategy in this country is based on sequential campaigns. Shortly after their defeat in one campaign, they prepare for the next one counting on the superiority of their human and capital resources. Therefore, you should be prepared in Chechnya for the next Russian campaign. The Chechen people are geographically isolated from the rest of the Islamic world, especially from those who can help them. Also, the movement of Arab volunteers is temporary and it is closely monitored by the Americans, including the Saudi movement of funds and individuals. It is in the interest of the U.S. to get rid of the Russians by using those volunteers in order to acquire the Caucasian oil. However, if the Russians win their next round against Chechnya, the Chechen people will be inflicted by a genocide. The Chechen population is only 750K, and the people cannot withstand the [brutal] Russian policy. The only way that guarantees the survival of the Chechen people is through acquiring weapons of mass destruction. The Chechen mujahidin are the best in acquiring these weapons which are scattered [in different locations]. According to Russian laws, Chechen mujahidin are Russian citizens, and it is well-known that the Chechen Mafia could get anything it wants from inside Russia. ⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Ibid.

Khattab, according to Hamid, discounted the letter. He wanted to persist with his plan to control the entire region.⁶⁶

Khattab and Shamil Basayev

Soon after he arrived in Chechnya, Khattab established a strong collaborative relationship with the Chechen commander Shamil Basayev. They joined their respective forces on virtually every battle they fought and then cofounded “the Islamic Army,” which was later put on the U.S. State Department’s list of foreign terrorist organizations list.⁶⁷ It was under the banner of the Islamic Army that they participated in the war in Dagestan. Both Khattab and Shamil were able to lead more than 1,200 men of their group to safety after they were trapped by Russian forces in the second Chechen war. (During this action, Shamil lost one of his legs after stepping on a mine.)⁶⁸

Buynaksk Battle

On 22 December 1997,⁶⁹ Khattab (most likely along with Shamil) decided to carry out an ambitious operation against a large Russian military base in Buynaksk village inside

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Andrea Koppel and Elise Labott, “U.S. Puts 3 Chechen Groups on Terrorist List,” CNN.com, no date, www.cnn.com/2003/US/02/28/chechens.terror/.

⁶⁸ Samir Saleh al-Suwailem, *Memories of Amir Khattab*.

⁶⁹ Robert Bruce Ware and Enver Kisriev, “Ethnic Parity and Democratic Pluralism in Dagestan: A Consociational Approach,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 53, no. 1: 42.

Dagestan. According to various sources, 30 to 120 fighters attacked the 136th Motorized Brigade based in the village of Gerlakh, near Buynask.⁷⁰ However, and as usual, Khattab had his own version of the story. He mentions that his plan was to mount a quick attack against this base using 100 elite mujahidin special forces, take over the warehouse in which Russian tanks were stored (it contained sixty T72 and T80 tanks, and around three hundred other vehicles) and then take over the entire camp which contained, according to Khattab, more than five thousand Russian soldiers. His ultimate plan was to capture not only the tanks but also the Russian soldiers, whom Khattab planned to take back to Chechnya and use to force the Russian government to make concessions in return for their freedom. Only the first part of the operation was successful: Khattab's men were able to take over the warehouse and the tanks in it; however, because of "a lack of good intelligence," they found that the tanks were without batteries or fuel. They ended up destroying the tanks before they withdrew from the scene.⁷¹

A Tour in Dagestan

According to Khattab, Russia maintained a "strict economic embargo"⁷² after the withdrawal of its troops from Chechnya, and it kept a clandestine intelligence machine operating in the country. Khattab claims that "we caught 37 intelligence agents who

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Samir Saleh al-Suwailem, *Memories of Amir Khattab*.

⁷² Ibid.

came to assassinate some commanders like Shamil, myself and others”⁷³ He saw this as a war, and he took it as an opportunity to announce a “new phase,” the objective of which was “the removal of all Russian presence from the Caucasus.”⁷⁴

Khattab did not want to wait for what he considered to be the inevitable return of Russian forces, thus he decided to launch attacks against Russian troops in Dagestan. He sent a group of “Dagestani brothers” whom he had trained to take over police stations to some Dagestani villages. He hoped to “expel the police out of an entire province and declare the implementation of shari`a law there.” He was sure that the Russians would intervene, which would give Khattab the excuse to enter Dagestan to strike against the Russians under the pretext of defending the locals. Khattab pursued his plan, but the Russian campaign was brutal, forcing him and his group to leave Dagestan three days after they entered.⁷⁵ In Hamid’s view, Khattab’s campaign was “a complete failure.” He carried it out “against the will of the Chechen government just like Bin Laden’s 9/11 attack was carried out against the will of the Taliban.”⁷⁶ What’s more, Hamid believes, “Khattab’s invasion of Dagestan gave the Russians the excuse to wage their second campaign against Chechnya and occupy it in December 1999.”⁷⁷

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Wa-Islamah.net, *Sayf al-Islam Khattab*.

⁷⁵ Samir Saleh al-Suwailem, *Memories of Amir Khattab*.

⁷⁶ Mustafa Hamid, *Salib fi Sama’ Kandahar*.

⁷⁷ Mustafa Hamid, *Tajikistan*.

Khattab did not simply underestimate the Russians' response to his plan in Dagestan, he was also unrealistic in his expectations with respect to the financial support he had counted on getting from his supporters in Saudi Arabia. He had requested the sum of US\$1 million from one of his fundraisers in Saudi Arabia, Yousif al-'Uyayri (a previous leader of AQAP, killed by the Saudi authorities in June 2003), to help him hold his position in Dagestan until the end of the winter. Al-'Uyayri went to one of the rich Saudis who agreed to donate SAR \$8 million only if Sheikh Salman al-'Uda asked him to donate the funds to Khattab's campaign. Al-'Uda told al-'Uyayri that he did not approve of the Arab intervention in the Caucasian region, thereby denying Khattab the funds he desperately needed.⁷⁸

The Second Chechen War and Khattab's Death

Shortly after the second Russian invasion of Chechnya, Khattab and other Chechen groups were forced to flee to the mountains, from where they launched a guerilla campaign against Russian forces—a campaign that Khattab excelled at. His group was able to destroy in a single day ('Id al-Fitr 2000) a number of Russian military vehicles

⁷⁸ "Yousif al-'Uyayri: Shumukh fi Zaman al-Hawan," *Sawt al-Jihad* magazine, no. 1, Sha'ban 1424 H (corresponds to September–October 2003), no author.

and cause many fatalities. Khattab made sure to document and film his victories.⁷⁹

Khattab's group used different types of guerilla warfare tactics, including the use of IEDs that Khattab himself made, according to one of his videos:

It is difficult to buy original landmines in the Republic of Chechnya, but the mujahidin have succeeded in constructing anti-personnel mines. These were tested and indeed they were found to be excellent and even better than the original ones.⁸⁰

Khattab's many effective operations against the Russian forces led the Russian government to make the killing of Khattab and other leaders of jihad in Chechnya a priority. Khattab's sources informed him that the Russian government gave Nikolai Partrishov, the director of the FSB, the Russian security service, a deadline of four months to capture the leaders of the shura council.⁸¹ The Russians mounted a massive campaign against the jihadists in the mountains and, in one battle, they came close to eliminating Khattab, Basayev and more than 1,200 fighters. In his description of the battle, Khattab gives credit to the unusual heroism he witnessed from the Russians: "We never experienced such bravery by the Russians. [The brothers] kept bringing to

⁷⁹ Samir Saleh al-Suwailem, *Memories of Amir Khattab*.

⁸⁰ Wa-Islamah.net, *Sayf al-Islam Khattab*.

⁸¹ Ibid.

me an injured [brother] to treat, or a martyr to bury. We could not bury martyrs [properly] because we didn't have digging equipments, so we dug holes with knives to bury the martyrs." Khattab related that when the Russians discovered their location, "the planes began to pound the ground and burn it, then they bombed us with rockets . . . I said to myself if half of the mujahidin were killed and other half is saved, it will be an acceptable percentage for us . . . It was a miracle that we were able to survive with only 50 martyrs, 100 injured."⁸²

The End

According to Abu al-Walid al-Ghamidi, Khattab's successor, the Russians spent a year planning Khattab's assassination. The Russians implanted two individuals in Khattab's group, one of whom penetrated Kattab's immediate circle a year before Khattab's death. Al-Ghamidi relates that

many of the brothers were suspicious and warned Khattab about dealing with this guy, suspecting him to be part of the Russian intelligence. At the beginning, Khattab himself was cautious when dealing with both of them as he rarely met

⁸² Samir Saleh al-Suwailem, *Memories of Amir Khattab*.

with them. When he had to, he used to deal with them far from his original location.⁸³

It seems that the two men were patient and persisted in their plan; with time, they built trust and displayed their utility, “as they knew the best route to transfer money, equipments and letters” to Khattab’s group from outside Chechnya. When the day came, according to al-Ghamidi,

they dipped one of the Arabic language letters, which was sent to Khattab by one of the brothers from the one of the surrounding countries, in a deadly poison. They gave it, along it with other letters and items to Khattab’s personal guards, and told them of the existence of very important letters that should be delivered to Khattab as quickly as possible. Khattab opened the letter and started reading it while he was eating; a few minutes later he felt dizzy and nauseous and went to bed. When he woke up for the morning prayer, he could barely breath, and soon

⁸³ Abu Usama, “The Story of the martyrdom of Commander Khattab,” by Aby al-Walid `Abd al-`Aziz al-Ghamidi, al-Fida’ Islamic Network, 23 September 2011, <http://alfidaa.org/vb/showthread.php?t=8483&highlight=%CE%D8%C7%C8>.

after he went into a coma . . . The doctor came quickly and realized from the symptoms he saw that Khattab was poisoned.⁸⁴

Khattab died at 3:00 a.m. on 19 March 2002.⁸⁵ Vladimir Putin, the Russian president, commented that “I wish and want to believe that Khattab was really liquidated.”⁸⁶ Putin continued, saying, “If he has indeed been eliminated, it would be another blow to terrorism.”⁸⁷ Ironically, Khattab was killed by poison, which he had described in his writings before joining jihad: “a drop of poison could make you fall down; unable to do anything.”

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ “Chechens ‘Confirm’ Warlord’s Death,” BBC News, 29 April 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/1957411.stm>.

⁸⁶ Suad Al-Rayis, “Khattab: Atory of Arab Mujahid Who Terrorized Russian Invaders in Caucasus Mountains,” reprinted at KavkazCenter.com, 20 March 2011 www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2011/03/20/15033.shtml.

⁸⁷ “Answers to Questions from Journalists after the Meeting on the Problem of the Caspian Region,” Kremli.ru, 25 April 2002, http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/text/speeches/2002/04/25/0002_type82915_149893.shtml.

